

# Carnival

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## History and Digital Sources

**Arturo Gallia**

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Today, the internet and new technologies influence the historian's work and his studies. Which are the possibilities and the limits imposed by these new instruments? The internet is the youngest mass medium, guarding and conveying memory into the society. Is it possible to consider it as 1) a new way of communication of history, 2) a new historical research tool and 3) a new "place of sources"?

### ***1. A New Way of Communicating History***

The internet is considered the last, but not the least, mass medium of the past century. It is not just a simple medium, rather can we consider it a *medium of media* or a *meta-medium* (Criscione 2006a). Within the internet it is possible to mix all the other media, from which it gathers and absorbs numerous peculiarities and elements. Thus, in a single "place" it is possible to use and enjoy all the contents normally broadcasted by the other media.

In an early, enthusiast embrace of the new medium at their disposal, historians believed it now was feasible to build a virtual copy of the ancient library of Alexandria of Egypt, a place to preserve all human history and culture (de Luna 2004). Whereas the internet indeed allows to distribute digital documents worldwide, these pieces of information are

also subject to volatility and reproducibility. Being edited, deleted, moved, or copied, such digital files risk to become indistinguishable.

Regarding these peculiarities of digital papers, historians have to approach them carefully. When quoting from a digital source, historians must take pains to verify the truthfulness of contents, specify *where* and *when* they look it up. The authors of digital papers almost never indicate the character and date of alterations, even if those changes fundamentally modify the content. Frequently, for instance, there is considerable confusion whether the editing had been done by the authors of the website or by users, adding comments, notes, and links, and posting new information.

On the internet, the communication flow does not follow the traditional pattern of broadcasting, a *one-to-all*, but works in a sort of “narrowcasting”, or an *all-to-all* (Criscione 2006a: 81-82). Therefore, some social behaviours are modified and there seems to be a levelling of hierarchies: instead of a pyramidal scale of users, one encounters ‘horizontal crowds’ of authors and users. This situation allows the web surfer to build up his own popularity regardless of academic schemes. Moreover, the new technology raises an important question about the relationship between older, established historians and their young students. Though the former are able to use traditional historical tools, they often struggle to apply new technologies and are mostly not interested in the internet as a tool of scientific work. Hence, the web suffers a lack of interest by older, experienced historians (Bandini / Bianchini 2007). On the other hand, students of history are so embedded in the virtual culture that they risk to disregard and not learn the use of basic instruments of historical research.

This generational tension could be solved if both parts entered a dialogue and older historians accepted the internet as the present and not saw in it a distant future. In Italy, for instance, digital papers are not considered as scientific publications. Yet, in the academic world, younger professors start to be interested in relations between history and digital sources, and some serials on these topics are published online. These publications are not innovative. In fact, they are just analogous texts published online and no hyper-texts wrote specifically for the web.

Writing for the web is not the same as writing on paper. Only in understanding the potentials offered by the internet can we make history ready to compete with the other social sciences in the third millennium. Writing history online is so easy and fast that it has positive, but also negative effects. On one hand, it becomes possible to release documents, contents, that is, information otherwise not available. On the other hand, these documents risk to lose their truthfulness and scientific value. The fear of historians, in consequence, is the incapacity to recognise which digital publication respects scientific paradigms and which rather intends a mystification of historical events. In fact, there are a lot of “history” web sites published by users that present historiographical questions at complete odds with state of the art research.

Today, we are observing the democratisation of the public sphere, through which the relationship between history, historians, students, and society is being reconfigured, leading towards a new way of the *public use of history* (Criscione 2006b). Historians can benefit from digital sources passively, just as web surfers, or they can have an active role, as authors or editors of web contents. In each case, they must have the ability to

recognise a historical document created with valid scientific instruments and reject everything proposed by questionable authors.

## **2. A New *Historical Research Tool***

Until not long ago, in order to do historical research historians went to libraries and archives, spending many hours or days to find books, references, and documents. The development of communication technologies and the computerisation of several customer services now allow historians to perform a large part of their work in remote distance using their personal computer.

Regarding historiographical and bibliographical research, being able to perform these activities faster, historians can save time that can be spent on other things. The common use of word processors, for instance, permits to write texts faster, edit, and finally send them by e-mail to the publisher or to other historians. Not surprisingly, the use of e-mail has spread early in the academic world. With this tool, historians can communicate with each other over long distances without ever meeting. This possibility has been extended by the introduction of instant messaging, that allows to write and ‘chat’ to others in real time and to share files and documents. With the use of online catalogues of libraries, historians can find books and articles from their own home. Newer online services such as *Google Books* even permit to turn over the pages of a book without holding it in the hands. In a similar vein, other web-based search engines allow us to find any kind of document required. For example, we can use *YouTube* to find videos, *Google Images* to find pictures and so on.



### 3. A New “*Place of Sources*”

The peculiarities of the ‘net’ are the apparent absence of censorship, the widespread diffusion, the ease of use, and the possibility of being both author and user of contents. Do these characteristics make its content non-verifiable and devoid of scientific validity? All traces left by men, including a movie on *YouTube* or a blog entry, inevitably become a potential source. Remembering the innovations in the criticism of historical sources brought by the school of *Annales*, the historian has to approach digital documents with particular attention. He must understand the peculiarities distinguishing them from traditional sources: digital documents are of a virtual, a non-material nature. A paper, to be recognised as source by traditional historical criticism, needs to respect specific characteristics: the stability of the physical device, the durability of the information, the inseparable unity between physical and logical structure. A digital document does not respect any of these, to the contrary, it is *immaterial*, *fluid* (or *plastic*) and *fragile* (Vitali 2004).

*Immateriality.* As has been said, digital documents are immaterial. We cannot read or even see them until we use a suitable device, as e.g. a personal computer, an e-book reader, and so on. When we ourselves create digital files we use a certain software that will translate every part of the information in sequences of ‘0’ and ‘1’. When we store and re-open it the software will read this sequence and translate it to a form readable by humans. Sometimes, we create a digital document, but the software will translate it into two or more files. For example, a web page consists of separate files, each being a composing part of the document. We could have one file for the picture, one for the text, one for the music, and so on. Only with the suitable software can we read the web page correctly and perceive it as one document.

*Fluidity.* The fluidity of a digital document is the feature of web contents of being altered and modified without any chance for the user to notice the change. This happens frequently without any mystificatory intention by authors or users. For example, think of picture-editing with a common software such as *Photoshop*. Making any kind of alteration means to change the authenticity of the original picture. The same goes for text: certain online software allows users to collaborate in the creation of digital documents. Anyone can join the work without meeting the others and will be able to add, modify, or delete parts of information. The documents remain work in progress without a definite completion, but they can always be downloaded and saved as (apparently definite) text files.

*Fragility.* Over time, digital documents become fragile and risk to disappear. This is a disquieting situation for anyone who wants to maintain ‘old’ digital papers. Every storage device is subject to natural deterioration and after some years we couldn’t access those documents any more. Moreover, there is a huge diversity of storage devices that are different from each other and often not mutually compatible. There is no single way to store files and it isn’t always possible to easily access and share stored data. Technological development allows to produce ever more capacious storage devices, but it does not resolve the problem of data loss. Finally, the easy production of digital contents and its online publication add up to such a vast amount of information, that most of it can never be taken into consideration by the virtual society, left alone by the historians.

### ***Conclusion***

The internet imposes itself on our lives and activities as it does on the works of historians. As has been said, the web is not only a new way of

communicating history, a research tool, or a new source for history. The internet and the virtual society present a new way of human relations, a new world that you may endorse or not, that may include or reject you. But it is impossible to be completely excluded or fully enclosed. Similarly, the internet is fundamental in the various stages of the historian's work. The new technologies are there today, not just in a distant future, and we cannot dismiss everything produced and published online as non-academic document. In the future, we will consider contemporary digital documents as historical sources and study the second millennium through the lens of these virtual papers.

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